

Writing as the Indelible: Grief in Contemporary Women's Memoir

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract:

In *The Long Goodbye*, Meghan O'Rourke writes that if "the condition of grief is nearly universal, its transactions are exquisitely personal" (57). She speaks to the acknowledgeable reality that all people face loss and she speaks to how it affects each person individually. Oftentimes, artists take to publicly expressing their grief through their art. How, then, can art about grief capture both the "nearly universal" and the "exquisitely personal"? What threads and commonalities make up the "nearly universal"? Writing throughout the ages has attempted to express this experience through words and pages and readings. In creative nonfiction, authors must translate their own understandings onto the written page. How do they get at "truth"? Several contemporary texts shed light on this idea, more specifically Meghan O'Rourke's memoir as well as *The Light of the World* by Elizabeth Alexander, *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, and *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion. Each memoir retains a unique writing style, structure, and plethora of literary elements while also contributing to the unifying aspects of the larger literary conversation about grief. These memoirs include resonant metaphors, often in the form of animism, and body imagery to create physical manifestations of grief. These physical manifestations each come about as searches for new identities, ones without the lost, bound by paper and glue and cover art. In that way, these memoirs serve as healing, a new limb so-to-speak, and as a way for the authors to preserve their lost loved ones.

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Finally, I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, who will remain in my heart forever. I miss her very much. I hope I honored her memory with this thesis.

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Process Analysis Statement

After losing someone close to me and searching over the years for a way to understand the experience, I decided I wanted to research grief for my Honors Senior Thesis, and then I aspired to produce a creative work based on what I found. Originally, I wanted to look at memoirs by women and compare them to men to see if either gender preferred certain literary elements or modes of expression, but no real separation distinguished the qualities and content enough in grief writing. Still, I sought after a new literary experience, one more contemporary and eye-opening, so I chose five women's memoirs about loss. In the late months of 2016 and the first two months of 2017, I read *The Light of the World* by Elizabeth Alexander, *The Long Goodbye* by Meghan O'Rourke, *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families* by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis. The latter two works I read to enhance my perspective on grief and grief writing.

I chose to write a critical analysis and a creative nonfiction essay based on my findings in the critical paper. I learned about tracing literary devices and threads throughout each memoir, connecting them as a whole, and then writing those into my own work. The critical paper taught me about text analysis, gathering quotes, forming the evidence into arguments, and emphasizing the "so what?" of my studies. I was mostly comfortable with the analysis part, but explaining why it mattered proved to be difficult for me. I knew it mattered—I just had a challenging time putting it all into words. What were the literary patterns I discovered in the memoirs saying about grief writing? That part of the Thesis tested me but working through it educated me so much about taking the points I had made and expressing what they had to add to the literary conversation about grief. The creative essay came after, and using the patterns and devices I

discovered in the memoirs, namely body imagery and metaphor, I developed my own writing about the grieving process. The essay did not happen overnight. I suffered from writer's block for quite some time until I finally gave the essay a rest and thought about other parts of my life for awhile. Then, after travelling to Nashville, Tennessee, for a weekend, I discovered that I could write the whole essay almost in one sitting. Several revision sessions followed and this version here is what resulted. I do not consider it finished, partly because I'm a writer and I still want to edit a lot more, but I'm pretty comfortable with this draft.

As to the project's meaning, I believe it to serve as a way to write into the depths of my heart and mind. Sometimes, I cannot access these places on my own. While most of my writing I seek to share, this project functioned as a more introspective endeavor for me, one with the help of an advisor and close friends who sustained me as I wrote. In this way, I found out I needed to write more about the topic of grief, on top of what I already had written, and I discovered new corners to turn and scenes about which to write. I did not write about my grandmother's death for almost a year and now, two years later, I feel even more comfortable addressing my grief and how I reacted to loss. I wanted to form it into words so I could read my thoughts back to myself. Hopefully, I can get this essay published somewhere. I do want to share it and let others know that their experiences of grief, however trying and chaotic, are valid. Still, I believe this project gave me exactly what the authors' writings gave them: a physical manifestation of a human experience. I have evidence that I lived and survived and that my grandmother lives on within my writing. These pages are that evidence.

Writing as the Indelible: Preserving Grief in Memoir

In an interview with *PBS NewsHour*, Elizabeth Alexander described her memoir about the sudden loss of her husband, *The Light of the World*, as her “feet on the earth,” a kind of “processing the world through art and writing” (YouTube). Though writing creative nonfiction about loss and grief poses many challenges for authors, the writing helps, as Alexander puts it, to ground the mind and heart to the physical page. As many grieving authors make clear in their works, it is one thing to survive the death of someone close, but it is an entirely different effort to create a physical representation of loss, a work of art. After reading recent grief works by both men and women and analyzing women’s works in particular, this author could find little to no factors distinguishing memoirs about grief by gender. Instead, the memoirs seemed to be drawn towards universal threads of experience while still maintaining their uniqueness. These threads center on concepts of metaphor and body imagery which in turn materialize healing. In a way, then, the deceased survive their deaths as physical legacy, as words or images on a canvas or a screen. Five memoirs written by women within the last six years, *The Light of the World*, *The Long Goodbye* by Meghan O’Rourke, *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, and *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion shed light on writing memoirs about grief.

As the writing in these memoirs involves a character or multiple characters readers understand to be dead, it consequently attempts to enliven dead characters through metaphor, symbolism, and manifestation. In some cases, a living character may see an animal and consider it to be the lost loved one or some kind of messenger. In others, manifestations present themselves in the forms of objects connected to the lost, like a brush, a song, or a token. These writers create characters out of organisms and objects, forms that a lost character can inhabit. At first glance, the metaphor in most writing performs some kind of necessary symbolic task. In

these cases, however, the metaphor goes beyond that, generating an entirely different literary component, character, through its own functions. In this way, the symbolic and metaphorical manifestations serve a special purpose in these women's memoirs about grief: reviving the lost so that readers may find the characters more reachable.

Evidence of the metaphor arrives rather directly from Meghan O'Rourke's *The Long Goodbye*. After the loss of her mother to cancer, O'Rourke spends much of her time researching the process of grief for her memoir. Still, she wonders about less grounded connections to her mother, connections of a spiritual nature. When meeting up with a friend, O'Rourke realizes she had discovered a few connections. Her friend asks if she has "found your metaphor for where your mother is?" (O'Rourke 130). O'Rourke remarks to herself that she has: in the sky and the wind. Later on in the memoir, she conveys that she also sees her mother in the air moving through the trees. In other scenes, a hawk and Frosty the Snowman seem to symbolize her lost mother. In her research, O'Rourke discovers what experts believe the metaphors signify. According to her findings, O'Rourke describes the concept of animism as a search to "see the dead person in objects and animals around you, and you construct your false reality where she is just hidden, or absent" (O'Rourke 143). Important to note is that all of these writers include this type of metaphor in their texts. They believe in the importance of the metaphor because of its power to breathe life into a dead character. In a way, then, the texts themselves become their own kind of manifestation, a way to keep the deceased alive. O'Rourke takes this a step further, even searching for "a different metaphor: a metaphor for the self after loss" (O'Rourke 217). *The Long Goodbye* might even be a physical form of her identity after loss.

In *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala, the metaphors and symbols seem to be everywhere. For Deraniyagala, her parents' house and her own home act as some of the largest symbols of loss.

Their vacancy and stillness serve as a reminder. The objects within them, however, give life to the deceased characters (Deraniyagala 151). Deraniyagala loses her husband, her children, and her parents to the 2004 tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka. In her grieving, she returns to the metaphors slowly, giving them more and more time in her memoir as she grows more comfortable with how they manifest her lost loved ones. When she visits her parents' home, she notes how they "emerged, a little" (Deraniyagala 63). When she returns to her own home in Colombo, she explains how it "anchors me to my children. It tells me they were real. I need to curl up inside it, now and again" (Deraniyagala 77). In her grief, she finds life in the vacant houses. Her characters come to life through the objects she describes, through the scenes she places against the backdrops of home. To understand what the lost meant to her, how they lived, she finds metaphors to substantiate their characters in her memoir. Later, during a hike in sub-Arctic Sweden, Deraniyagala pauses in the vast, empty landscape. In the topography, she sees her dead loved ones killed by the tsunami. Sub-Arctic Sweden penetrates her defenses. She describes her shock, how she is "trespassing so wholly back into that life" (Deraniyagala 127-128). As she progresses through her grief in *Wave*, Sonali Deraniyagala includes her run-ins with so many manifestations and reminders to help readers access who she grieves.

Elizabeth Alexander possesses a similar heightened interest in metaphors and manifestations throughout *The Light of the World*. Before Ficare dies, Alexander and her husband check up on the latter's dying mother. They leave the hospice center on the night she dies and encounter a fox. Alexander remarks that they "knew somehow that it was her" as she also knew "the ravenous hawk came to take Ficare." She explains: "Poetic logic is my logic. I do not believe she was a fox. But I believe the fox was a harbinger" (Alexander 73). Here, in Alexander's memoir, evidence of the animism mentioned by O'Rourke shows up. Alexander connects the fox

with her mother-in-law and her husband with the hawk she saw around the time of his death. She brings them back to life by highlighting the importance of other living beings involved. In terms of objects, a table serves as a metaphor for her family without her husband. Alexander includes a small poem she wrote in her memoir: "We are now a three-legged table, / a family of three, once a family of four" (Alexander 142). Ficare, her husband, held the last end of the table up before. Now she and her two sons must balance the weight. This metaphor provides insight into the text and characters and how they now find an essential part missing. They find it in other objects, they find Ficare in those objects, and one of the sons confirms it. The writing often touches on the symbolism of Ficare's painting supplies, his lottery tickets, and the garden near the house.

Alexander includes one such scene on pages 146 and 147, "'Look,' I say, 'Daddy is saying hello to us,' and he surely is. Through the stalks and the blooms come the touch of his hands on the bulbs. *Hi, honey*, I say, and I hear him say, / *Hi, sweetie*, and the hurt is completely fresh, the missing, the where have you gone." The garden provides a life for the character of Ficare, gives him certain qualities, almost lungs. Throughout *The Light of the World*, Elizabeth Alexander visits these objects and symbols to find or communicate with her deceased husband.

Wild by Cheryl Strayed interacts with metaphors during the main character's backpack journey after she loses her mother to cancer. While Strayed hikes on the Pacific Crest Trail, she encounters natural elements and animals that symbolize or act as manifestations of her mother. At one point during the hike, she encounters a fox. The fox approaches and looks at her. The writing treats this event as sort of a spiritual realization and connection. Strayed does not want the fox to leave: "'Come back,' I called lightly, and then suddenly shouted, 'MOM! MOM! MOM! MOM! MOM!'" (Strayed 144). Instead of any explicit explanation, the dialogue conveys the deeper meanings and representations at stake. The fox, in some way, symbolizes her dead

mother. The concept of animism appears in this memoir to vitalize Strayed's mother, to add more character depth. Strayed also senses her mother in books she reads, particularly books by authors her mother liked. She flips through one called *The Novel* by James Michener, one of her mother's favorites. She notes that she senses her "mother's presence so acutely, her absence so profoundly, that it was hard to focus on the words" (Strayed 151). The books that remind Strayed of her mother help to manifest her mother's character. Though flashbacks of times with her mother often provide context, Strayed's interaction with books like *The Novel* bring her mother back to life by characterizing her for the text and readers in the present of the memoir. In terms of the contextual flashback, recollections of Lady, her mother's horse, symbolize loss and aging and decrepitude. Strayed and her remaining family must put the horse down. In the heartbreaking scene, Strayed often refers to her mother, how the horse seemed like a piece of her mother she to which she held on. Animals have a special place in *Wild*, especially in moments of revelation or spiritual communication, since the memoir revolves around Strayed's journey through parks, trails, and mountain ranges. One particular mountain, Mount Mazama, serves as another kind of metaphor in the writing: a metaphor for Strayed without her mother, "a metaphor for the self after loss" as O'Rourke calls it. While most other manifestations in the memoir somehow represent her mother, this particular one feels connected to her own self. The text hints at the meaning, "what a mountain and a wasteland and an empty bowl turned into after the healing began" (Strayed 273). After the volcano that was Mount Mazama exploded hundreds of years ago, the area formed into a caldera. Strayed writes healing into the language around her description of Mazama to connect it to her own healing. The representations in these memoirs often go beyond vivifying deceased characters; they even spawn manifestations of living characters' changed selves.

Blue Nights takes a somewhat different approach than the other memoirs, focusing on manifestations entirely drawn from contextual descriptions and reflection. While Joan Didion revives her lost daughter through metaphors, these manifestations come from reflections and flashbacks connected to her present experiences. The relationship between the then self and the now narrator fosters the development of these symbols and metaphors within the memoir. In her grief, Didion finds her daughter, Quintana, in places around her home in New York City. Central Park, for instance, contains a bench with Quintana's name on it. When Didion walks by, sees the bench, or thinks about it, the metaphor takes her back to times with Quintana. The bench holds a weight, both literally and figuratively, when Didion sits and reflects on it. This metaphor indicates the level of importance Quintana had in Didion's life. Didion refers this bench to readers, "'*Quintana Roo Dunne Michael 1966-2005*,' the plaque on this bench reads. '*In summertime and wintertime*'" (Didion 154). The reference to seasons on the plaque expresses the presence of Quintana in living things and objects during the all parts of the seasons. Quintana continues to live through the seasons in the objects around Didion. Didion also brings her daughter back to life quite literally in a play. As with *Strayed*, the creation or possession of literature preserves the loss and grief of the mourner. Didion writes a play after her daughter's death and then watches an actress play her daughter. She enjoys the time during the "five evenings and two afternoons a week, these ninety full minutes, the run time of the play, during which she did not need to be dead" (Didion 167). Quintana's character comes back to life through her mother's works of writing. Readers can understand the connection more clearly with Didion's example. The metaphor of the stephanotis, a flower Quintana liked, appears throughout the memoir. Quintana chooses the flower for the arrangement of her hair during her wedding and Didion remembers this, calling back Quintana's childhood spent in California at a house where

stephanotis grew. Didion asks in her ruminations if the stephanotis in Quintana's hair was "another sentimental choice? Did she remember the stephanotis? Is that why she wanted it, is that why she wove it into her braid?" (Didion 7). Though Didion only returns to this particular metaphor in reflection and flashback, the symbol of the flower calls back even more memories and, if anything, a facet of Quintana's childhood. The plethora of memories based on this flower gives her character new life in the text. To give these new lives more physicality, Didion and the other authors also focus on descriptions of the body.

Body imagery highlights the conflicts between connection and separation and between the lost and the grieving. In *A Grief Observed*, author C.S. Lewis comments on the relevance of the body to loss. Writing about the death of his wife, he notes that there "is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can't avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H's lover" (Lewis 10). Contrary to Lewis, who more explicitly expresses the body's meaning in grief, the authors in these memoirs focus quite a bit on imagery to convey that meaning, to create a connection with the deceased. The body and its connections to love, marriage, and childbearing indicates the level of connection or separation between the living and the lost. Whereas the metaphors give dead characters new life in the memoirs, the body imagery physically connects the narration to the textually revived. Through this connection or lack thereof, the deceased begin to take more of a physical form in the memoirs.

O'Rourke in *The Long Goodbye* watches her mother's body gradually and then rapidly deteriorate as it battles cancer. The description of her mother's body and of her own provides an insight into their relationship. After her mother's diagnosis, O'Rourke and her mother go about some errands with new perspective. They go shopping and view each other in dressing rooms

“after years of being shyly polite with our bodies.” In response to her illness and sharing these moments, O’Rourke’s mother apologizes “for not being a ‘mother’ anymore” (O’Rourke 10-11), creating a kind of distance between the characters. The body imagery in this passage hones in on the mother-daughter relationship, the bond they share, and how grieving occurs with someone terminally ill. Later on, the text includes a quotation from O’Rourke’s father after her mother’s death. He tells his children to remember that they “carry her forward in this world. You all have her inside you” (O’Rourke 124), meaning that their bodies carry their mother’s DNA. They are a continuance of her in both spirit and physicality. They are connected. O’Rourke revisits this idea many times throughout her memoir. Towards the end of the book, she attests to the bodily connections with a mother and how they affect her grief writing. She singles her mother out, asking who “else contained me, felt me kick, nursed me, held the towel out to me when I got out of the bath” (O’Rourke 296). At this point, she feels closer to her mother. Concepts of birth and motherhood spring up from O’Rourke’s writing as she tackles the difficulty of grappling with the death of her mother in memoir. *The Long Goodbye* includes these kinds of body imagery as a way to establish character relations and emphasize the conflict between separation and connection.

Sonali Deraniyagala pokes at the importance of body imagery in *Wave*. Though not always a clear, direct admittance, she describes how her body and its state are intertwined with her husband, her children, and her parents. Following the tsunami, Deraniyagala observes herself in the mirror. She notices how battered and bruised her body is, remarking that the injuries are “needless proof, this was far too real” (Deraniyagala 37). “Needless” suggests her level of comprehension about the separation in her grief. At this point, the conflict between separation and connection leans far toward the former. So soon after the tragedy, the palpability of her

relationships with her husband, her children, and her parents evades her. At another point in *Wave*, during a flashback, Deraniyagala employs body imagery as a way to express her experience as a mother. Her sons “would trace the scar on my stomach with their fingers, astonished they’d emerged from there” (Deraniyagala 120). The signs of her Caesarean section now swing her feelings in her writing toward connection. She remembers from where her sons came and how they understood it as well. She juxtaposes the body imagery with her remembrance of her life before the tsunami to imply how close or distant she feels from the dead. In this way, the description of the body arranges the presentation of relationships within the text and their levels of intimacy. Soon after the flashback, Deraniyagala reveals how she feels about the intimacy, pointing at the change from being “tightly wrapped around them, their moods and needs tugging at me always” to “insisting to myself that it was pointless keeping close to them, because I was no longer their mum” (Deraniyagala 123). Here, the writing challenges her previously assumed functions. The body imagery leads her to determine that her role as motherly figure changed, is no longer present.

Out of all the memoirs, *The Light of the World* seems to be most fascinated with the body. Elizabeth Alexander illustrates the importance of it many times in the memoir. In doing so, she captures the closeness of her relationship with her husband. Just after he dies, Alexander focuses on her husband’s genitalia. She clarifies its meaning to her, “The penis with which he actually made the human beings who are our children, is sign and symbol and substance of what I have lost” (Alexander 32). A body part she can no longer interact with symbolizes her separation from her husband. Her ability to make children with him ceases. It dies with him. In this description of his body, the writing highlights the distance between the author and this character. Alexander then describes the visit to the hospital where the staff officially pronounces

him dead. She and her sons go to see Ficare's body, they "touch and hug and weep over the body that no longer houses him. It is somehow not frightening to see this body. In these moments it still belongs to us." (Alexander 34). Right after the death, Ficare seems close, close to his body, close to the main characters. Alexander's writing specifically communicates that the body belongs to her and her children when it is still warm, prior to rigor mortis. The body imagery here works at the conflict between separation and distance while also unveiling the relationships between characters during the early moments of their grieving. As Alexander and her sons move through the grieving process, the separation lessens as they discover Ficare all around them. They might not have his physical body, but his spiritual form is always near. She speaks to this when she says his body "is less sharp, more permeating, more essence, more distilled. It is less his body here, his body there, and more, he is the ground beneath us and the air we breathe" (Alexander 152). The body imagery becomes more metaphysical, connected to natural elements and metaphorical signs. The conflict between separation and closeness now moves back to closeness, the relationships themselves drawing nearer to each other. *The Light of the World's* body imagery gravitates toward the spiritual connections between the living and the dead.

Similarly, Cheryl Strayed focuses on the spirituality of the body and the connections between characters in *Wild*. Her mother, like O'Rourke's, suffers through cancer before succumbing to it. In both cases, body imagery holds a certain power over the text, highlighting the level of connection between daughter and mother before and after the mother's death. After hearing the news about her mother's cancer, Strayed and her mother find solace in a women's restroom. Though separated by the walls of a stall, Strayed describes how she feels connected to her mother, "We didn't exchange a word. Not because we felt so alone in our grief, but because we were so together in it, as if we were one body instead of two" (Strayed 12). The attachment

between Strayed and her mother is extremely strong as the former begins to grieve in the writing. She also describes how she could feel her mother trembling and sobbing against the stall wall. The descriptions of the body say what the writing does not explicitly: that the bond is there and their bodies are conjoined. Strayed elaborates more on her feelings about grief a few pages later as the gravity of the situation sets in: “now that she was dying, I knew everything. My mother was in me already. Not just the parts of her that I knew, but the parts of her that had come before too” (Strayed 19). “My mother was in me already” suggests that Strayed recognizes the parts of her mother within her. Their bodies connect through lineage, through motherhood and childhood. Strayed divulges this in her grief writing. The text uses body imagery and description to express the power of their connection to each other. Strayed recounts the smaller details too that stick in her memory. She looks back on the appearance of her mother’s body after the death. The writing’s description points out her mother’s hair, how it was “brown and brittle and frayed from being in bed for weeks.” It notes that her mother’s body “was altered but still fleshy when she died, the body of a woman among the living” (Strayed 24). The “body of a woman among the living” holds sort of a boundlessness to it, as if Strayed’s mother has an impact that transcends the physical boundaries on the body. Her love for Strayed lives on through, and beyond, the writing.

The body imagery of *Blue Nights* includes more on the aging process but still centers around the relationships between mother and daughter. As Joan Didion grows older, she wonders at her ability to take care of her husband and daughter. After they both pass away, she asks herself if they truly believed in her, if they actually thought, despite her frailty, that she was a strong mother. Didion highlights her concerns about her daughter in questions on page 101, “How could she have even imagined that I *could* take care of her? She saw me as needing care

myself. She saw me as frail. Was that her anxiety or mine?" Frailty emerges throughout the questions of the memoir and in these questions Didion reveals some of the anxieties closest to her heart. In describing her own body during reflective periods of thought, she explains her relationship with her daughter. She doubts her abilities on many occasions, often providing details about her body to analyze her role as a mother. Didion even asks the reader to trust her, providing an aside after a reflection: "I tell you this true story just to prove that I can. That my frailty has not yet reached a point at which I can no longer tell a true story" (Didion 109).

Though readers may not doubt her credibility, she wants to reassure them that the functionality of her body does not compromise her abilities as a writer. She believes, despite the frail nature of her hands, of her mind, and of her thin frame, that her writing can accurately preserve her grief for her daughter. In sadness, Didion also believes that the distance between her and her deceased daughter will only grow if she tries to "reach" her, if she tries to "take her hand" or let her sleep against her shoulder. She knows that if she tries to find some tangible part of her daughter that "she will fade from my touch. Vanish" (Didion 188). The separation is clear from her imagery about touch. No longer can Didion feel her daughter's physical presence. The tragedy of this separation becomes all the more clear through *Blue Night*'s use of body imagery.

Writing through grief is a kind of development, oftentimes called ritual and involving ceremony, and it provides physical structure as the narration searches for its own identity. For example, in *Blue Nights*, the short chapters weave through a series of reflections. Joan Didion searches for her new self after her loss in the reflective processes she details in her memoir. In her own work, Meghan O'Rourke describes this search for identity in grief writing: "you don't just mourn the dead person, you mourn the person you got to be when the lost one was alive" (228). The author's narration seeks to grasp its voice and identity throughout the writing, setting

up a process that in turn creates a physical entity, that is, a new identity, one without the lost alive and present. Through this materialization, the authors record their healing. The metaphors invigorate character, the body imagery comments on the closeness and distance of character relationships, and the process of writing the memoir itself brings about tangible evidence of a grieving identity bound by paper, glue, and ink.

O'Rourke dedicates quite a bit of her writing on the process which she mostly connotes as "ritual" in *The Long Goodbye*. She envies the grief identities common and conspicuous in centuries prior, when one could wear black clothing for months. According to the research supplied in her memoir, O'Rourke notices that the "rituals of public mourning that once helped channel a person's experience of loss have, by and large, fallen away" (O'Rourke 13). Thus, the publicity of grief becomes a large question for her in her writing. Many times throughout *The Long Goodbye*, O'Rourke goes after that question, pondering how she should write about grief since her writing will likely become an accessible physicality. This questioning, present throughout, forms a process of healing and a piece of art borne by it. She hates how conversations about grief are taboo in modern times and wonders then how to write about it, to transpose thoughts and feelings onto paper. She mentions other symptoms, like "insomnia or other sleep disorders, difficulty breathing, auditory or visual hallucinations, appetite problems, and dryness of mouth" (O'Rourke 153). These come in many forms and orders during the grieving process but she wants to make sure they are noted. O'Rourke comes to terms with them, as well as the manifestations and metaphors, by writing it all down. She puts it best when she says: "Our memory is our weather, and we are re-created by it every day" (O'Rourke 285). Every attempt at writing about grief is a search for a new identity, one without the lost loved one, the daily change of weather that shapes her memoir. Her research indicates that some grief

experts suggest mourning comes in waves and she agrees with this description (O'Rourke 165). Through these waves, O'Rourke creates the text, resulting in a physical materialization of grief, a physical body for the deceased.

Sonali Deraniyagala's grief includes a series of initial challenges, dates, memories, and steps. *Wave's* writing acts as a mirror to this. She refers to this process early on in *Wave* when she says there "were all those first times" (Deraniyagala 46). For the first time, she does not see her children's shoes by the door, she sees her children's fingerprints, photos, she sees money that reminds her of her husband, but never her loved ones. All of these firsts denote development, a search for a new identity, the healing of an irreparable wound. Soon after, Deraniyagala details the memorial service. Instead of reading the invitation, she "took one and posted it to the Dutch" (Deraniyagala 84). She wanted to let the Dutch people living in her old home know that she did not want them there. Instead of concerning herself with the memorial process, she chooses her own form of ritual, of protection, and later wrote about it. Her actions laid out on paper help to form this new identity, a symbol of coping. These actions indicate at what points she grows back into her new life and at what points she is reluctant to accept it. As Deraniyagala becomes more comfortable with her new self, a self without those she lost to the tsunami, she includes her questioning in the narration: "In order to survive this bizarre and brutal truth, do I have to make murky the life I had with them?" (Deraniyagala 125). While in the text she takes steps to do so, her writing, present now in physical form, suggests a lasting connection to the manifestations and body imagery. She brings in local religious figures to have Buddhist rituals at her parents' house (Deraniyagala 168). Years later, Deraniyagala feels more stable and settled in her grief, further along in the process. Still, she struggles with who she is without her husband, her children, and her parents. The memoir takes years to write, years to materialize, a gradual and steady

preservation of her life before the wave. Towards the end of her memoir, she recognizes her lasting uncertainty: "I am without them, as much as I am on my own. And when I hold back this truth, I am cut loose, adrift, hazy about my identity. Who am I now?" (Deraniyagala 227). Even at the end of the memoir, in an entry written almost a decade after the tsunami killed her family, Deraniyagala poses that the process of searching for her identity, her development, is continual. It does not end with the completion of this memoir, and yet this text acts as the creation of a new self, in a way, a new limb.

In *The Light of the World*, Elizabeth Alexander's poetic background helps her document her grief and new identity after loss. She often speaks about waiting for her deceased husband, Ficare. She thinks if she sits "on the stoop through the night he will come at dawn." She acknowledges that "I am getting older and he is not" (Alexander 105). Alexander and her memoir both seem to wait for something: for Alexander, it is her husband's return; for the memoir, it is an answer, an understanding, a way to regroup. Who is she now? By transcribing grief into a physical form, Alexander pushes more and more to respond to that question. After some time passes, she opens up more about her new self and the identity of her writing. An important statement arises on page 119. In sort of an encompassing declaration, she comes to understand that "I had Ficare; I have Ficare; I have these extraordinary children; I have a village; I have an art-form; I am black; we are African; we come from survivors and doers; my parents are wise and strong; my body is strong" (Alexander 119-120). All of these pieces make up her identity and her memoir. She had and has Ficare; he is with her still, in different forms, physically represented in her memoir. She looks to the harbingers and the parts of the body that materialize grieving, that breathe life into a dead character. She writes "to fix him in place, to pass time in his company, to make sure I remember, even though I know I will never forget" (Alexander

147). She grounds her grief and her reformed identity in writing. It protects and vitalizes her loss. In a lecture given to a class she teaches, Alexander suggests “that the day brings new light and that the ocean which washes away all traces on the sand leaves us a new canvas with each wave” (Alexander 165). “A new canvas” is the materialization and the day and the waves are healing, the scabbing of deep wounds, survival through the “new light.”

The materialization of *Wild* mostly consists of Cheryl Strayed’s physical journey along the Pacific Crest Trail. Some of the preceding actions in the memoir are physical and deal with the body, namely, Strayed ending her draw to heroin, finalizing her divorce by getting a tattoo, and having an abortion. As Strayed sets out on the Trail, she notes right away what it means to her. She believes the PCT would “make” her. She describes her goals: “I’d walk and think about my entire life. I’d find my strength again, far from everything that had made my life ridiculous” (Strayed 57). Losing her mother led her life into a downward spiral, one that comes before the memoir. Strayed’s writing, then, hones in on her process through grief and crawling out of that hole, creating art from her healing. As in many other gripping nonfiction accounts, the writing process is a physical journey with hope for change. Strayed admits to her underestimation of the Trail before suffering its realities. She heals physically from broken toenails, cuts, bruises, and falls. She thinks, “perhaps it was okay that I hadn’t spent my days on the trail pondering the sorrows in my life, that perhaps by being forced to focus on my physical suffering some of my emotional suffering would fade away” (Strayed 92). Her focus on manifestations of her mother and on her body results in a physical depiction of her struggles: the memoir. Oftentimes, Strayed pushes away a more public display of her grief. Like O’Rourke, Strayed wonders about how to write about grief as a private process. When encountering hikers towards the beginning of her journey, Strayed points out that grief “doesn’t have a face” (212). She struggles with letting

anyone know about her troubles. As she moves through the journey, Strayed speaks about it more and more with fellow hikers. The written account of the journey unravels her grief, sheds light on it, refreshes her and changes her perspective constantly. The process eventually leads her to write the memoir itself, a book about Cheryl after she lost her mother. Burning the pages of a book in a fire, Strayed recites her mother's name, calling it a "ceremony." At the end, Cheryl believes that she can "finally see the whole thing. Who she'd been to me and who she hadn't. How it was she belonged to me profoundly, and also how she didn't" (Strayed 269-70). The text includes the process of her grief, the fox in which she saw her mother, the descriptions of her mother's body in the hospital bed, to materialize a part of her mother, to preserve her memory, and to understand life without her.

Blue Night's manifestation is ultimately a collection of reflections. Joan Didion does not explain much about her process, yet it produced this work of art. Instead, she hints at bits and pieces of it in her reflections. In a conversation before her daughter's death, Didion's daughter shares her point of view. She tells her mother that when someone dies, "don't dwell on it" (Didion 155). Didion brings up this statement many times, often asking herself if her writing process includes this kind of dwelling on grief and loss, if it is occupying too much space in her mind and on the page. In the text, she wonders at her capability to maintain composure and strength. Soon after the scene with her daughter, Didion promised herself that she "would maintain momentum" (Didion 165). The momentum refers to her processing of grief, of seeing Quintana in objects around her and feeling her through touch, of grappling with it and identifying what remains. This momentum propels her pen. Through written reflection, Didion moves through the grieving process. They are her ritual, building the momentum that unfolds her memoir. Didion closes her work with a concern about the future. After the loss of her daughter,

she wants to preserve her memory, the feeling of her presence, her mental and physical strength: "I myself placed her ashes in the wall. I myself saw the cathedral doors locked at six" (Didion 188). She knows what she is "experiencing," she knows "what the frailty is," and she knows "what the fear is." For her, it is losing "what is still to be lost." Though her memoir preserves what she can fit into its physical boundaries, she wonders at the fate of the remaining grief.

Authors attempt to grapple with the questions of grief time and time again with creative nonfiction. In doing so, they form concepts and threads that create a unifying literary conversation. *The Light of the World* by Elizabeth Alexander, *The Long Goodbye* by Meghan O'Rourke, *Wave* by Sonali Deraniyagala, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, and *Blue Nights* by Joan Didion tackle these questions, concepts, and threads with literary prowess. They share an investment in metaphorical manifestation, an interest in depicting body parts and functions, and using these two methods to create a physical, distributable form of grief art. The texts borne out of grief come about by the grieving process itself and showcase a preservation of the lost and a search for a new identity. The metaphors and body imagery materialize the preservation and searches into an entity, a book, a profound collection of pages attempting to record part of a human experience. They do that and more, leaving an indelible impression on the literary conversation about grief and its expression through creative nonfiction.

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Parallax

Lose a day for the drive.
Lose a day for the changes.
Lose a day for the lost.

Before the journey, we eat. Before the road, nourishment, battle preparation. They brought food to my family after she died. Down the sidewalk, up the driveway, to the front door. One neighbor gave us an immense lasagna dish, the sweet red sauce. I ate it up in a couple days, the best lasagna I ever tasted. The grieving need to eat too, they need to fill their bellies. The darkest kinds of futures starve us. To move in any direction, we have to sharpen our swords, the battles of coping await.

Spring 2017, my friend Elena with me. Highways of the Midwest. Neons and magentas deflect off car windows. People deflect their allergies. April laser tag and discotheque. Electronic dancing Easter bunny. It was heating up again, the music of the songbird.

And so, on a Sunday morning, I ordered my typical breakfast: two eggs scrambled with a side of stability, bacon cooked just right, hash browns cooked well, thank you, frothy biscuit pieces, and a sweet tea swig. My friend ordered something similar, and in the earliness of that recovery morning, we said little other than awakening glances. She stared at the table and I looked everywhere but at her.

I wanted the waitress to feed me inspiration. Where was that on the menu? I wanted to be unstuck, free from my writer's block, so far away from any home. Feed me the words I need to say. Feed me up. Drink up. More tea, please.

I'm weary. I need the sugar.

The sun, with the thunder of Helios's chariot sounding, just now rising over Nashville, Tennessee, somewhere a country song, maybe Johnny Cash, the museum closed this early but the legacy open, colliding with the square window panes of the Cracker Barrel and splitting in so many directions, the disco ball of buttermilk daylight.

None of the beams aimed at us directly. Not yet the hour of interrogation or soliloquy. Our eyes had yet to adjust to a new number on a calendar.

Spreading dark apple butter onto my toast, that savory sweet spread, I spoke to Elena about an essay, one I had trouble tackling. She nodded and offered a few suggestions which I put in my pocket for safekeeping. That's what you should do with suggestions: zip them up tight.

Did she order coffee?

"The waitress doesn't like me," I observed. Elena disagreed, scoffing at my early sensitivity, rubbing the eyes, sniffing, thoughts pulled back up the nose and through the mind.

When we get back in the car, I thought, I will play Joni Mitchell's Blue album again and again and again. The music tasted so sweet. A tablet of euphoria. Her voice and that dulcimer like a light blanket, a thin one, clinging to bony elbows and interwoven legs.

The sweet tea tasted warm against my allergies from the hike through Percy Warner Park the day before. Spring popcorn, the young mint month. Seurat must have loved it. Families with kids with light jackets with dogs in residential parks, hills, cracking sidewalks, old brick homes, history perhaps, none of which I knew. Southern modern charm. Pastels decorating buildings and yards of houses, chalk scenes, little bunny drawings and pink and baby blue and faded yellow eggs on lawns and hanging from ceilings.

I hate chalk under my nails.

From my vantage point, facing almost one half of the restaurant, the large lattice fence to my left side dividing the room in half, I noticed a large table in the opposite corner, one on the other side of the wall from the hostess station, and a full-course meal of memories hit me.

"It just hit me," I remarked to Elena. "All at once. I can't believe it. I think I can write." She smiled and told me she was happy for me. Then she took another bite.

The night before, sweet, dark, red wine and whiskey that forgot sunscreen and dancing and a disc jockey without discs, just a laptop, and fraternity brothers. The kind of night, the kind of right night, when you don't care what your shoes touch, when your back slouches as you watch, the words slur, the room spins, the carousel of carefree diversion, the troubles go away or attack in full force, socks rip, doors slam, sleep evades . . . and yet the stars—from the stars we could not escape.

They hung above us like angel tails.

This morning, this morning after, still groggy, a little hungover, waking up. Empty alcohol bottles filled with a dizzy, frizzy air, curtains slowly opened, Amelia Bedelia drew the

curtains, soothing jazz, a ruffling of covers, the splash from the shower head, tile, drainage, a vulnerability. I opened the window to the new life outside. New life all around me, bud and spud, my nose to clog, my throat to scratch, shock to change.

Zyrtec D or 5-HTP, allergies or sadness? White pills, swallow, hope, an answer on a branch.

Like in those movie scenes, a tilt-shift and spotlight: I saw Grandma sitting there at the corner table of the Cracker Barrel, alive as ever, in a solid red shirt dotted with small, white objects (maybe flowers but I can't recall them now). I heard her sheet-music voice, soft as it touched the eardrum, the way the white napkin crinkled as she tucked it into the bottom of her collar, the way it gathered stains. I watched her fork gracefully scoop up over-easy eggs, a fragile chomp, her delicate wrists bending to bring them back up to her mouth, then the bite and slide of teeth across fork tine. Spoons too, moving back and forth, the journey of the spoon, the balance of food through distance and space-time.

The balance of everything.

Until my sixteenth year, my maternal family reserved a week in mid-July for vacationing in a log cabin within Brown County State Park (with one bathroom—yikes). We trekked from Chesterton and Valparaiso, Indiana, down on Highway 65, or if you prefer, Highway Barricade and Construction Cones, to the Park, in a Town & Country or Nissan Pathfinder depending on the year, making one stop along the way in Columbus, Indiana. In Columbus, we wove through the mall there before eventually settling on one of the nearest restaurants to the highway, Cracker Barrel, for an early dinner.

In my earlier years, Pappy could park farther away from the restaurant. Grandma made the distance. Distance. She had that ability then. Sometimes she even ventured around the outlet mall with us, sometimes in a buggy.

In my later years, Pappy parked near the front. My parents, brother, and I awaited her arrival on the rocking chairs, moving but not going anywhere, watching her sweat and struggle with each step, helpless to help her. Walking alongside her set off her frustration. We could tell she felt embarrassed to have so many others helping her to walk. She would shout at us sometimes to leave her be, to let her walk alone. Sometimes, she'd silently submit to our support.

When you see someone dying, you measure distance by steps, be they by the feet or by a list. Distance as measurement between two people but for her it was the journey of pain to a chair or couch or seat of relief. Step, another, one more, sharp pain in the knee caps, damn aphasia, damn primary progressive aphasia, damn the walker, damn that disease.

We held the doors for her and tried not to let the smiles of pity around us creep behind our knees and under our arms and tickle. Maybe those who stared at her understood. Maybe they had an overweight relative, one with primary progressive aphasia . . . or dementia, or Parkinson's, or Alzheimer's. *The symptoms often blend*, the doctors told us. I remember now Grandma's heavy breathing, her stomach and lungs expanding, deflating, alive. Ribs and chest and circulation, throat opening, nostrils like plane flaps.

I miss her hugs now, her embrace, her breathing against my toddler arms.

I rode down with them one time. Grandma kept yelling at Pappy to turn down John Denver, but it seemed like the cornfields and forests were singing, not the CD.

Grandma slept on couches in her later years, the ones I remember, hardly ever on her bed. She liked the noise of the Poltergeist television, newscasters inaudible (as they usually are, even when they're loud). I miss climbing up the bi-level stairs to the living room, hands on the steps, climbing the shaggy carpet tree steps, and seeing her on the main couch watching *You've Got Mail* or *Just Like Heaven*.

She was a piece of heaven I had for 20 years. Then I lost her.

She died in the brief few minutes when no one tended to her, when we were all in different rooms, air conditioning on full blast, the chill, the grave condition, the shower running, water on my skin, that loud clock ticking in the living room, feet away from her, television playing some music on one of the upper Comcast channels. Pappy, my mom, and my aunt lounged outside on the back porch, getting some fresh air, fanning themselves and talking about things I will never know.

I dressed in the bathroom, having showered after mowing the lawn during a morning that touched 100 degrees. My vision melted when I looked outside. So hot out there; a desert of grass chunks and displaced rocks. The sidewalk sweating. Dehydration. Maddie, my cousin, made tea in the kitchen. Walls between the hot and cold, barriers to keep each tempestuous temperature at bay. Cameron, also my cousin, watched TV downstairs, or played video games. My cousin Alexis had left earlier that morning to take care of some things at home, hoping to return later on in the day. She did, but not for the reason she planned.

Grandma waited until a time when none of us were present, which hadn't happened in days, and then she left. Left us. No goodbye, no door closing. We discovered her, still warm as if alive, her body still. She might have died a few seconds or a couple minutes before our discovery

of her. My aunt and I found her first, the rest of my family right behind us. I felt the life leave her. I felt my life leave me. I remember the words I wailed:

I love you forever, Grandma.

I love you forever.

Please don't go.

Please stay.

I love you forever.

My cousin Alexis came back as soon as she heard. I cried for hours on the bed, Grandma's bed, the one she no longer used, in the back bedroom. Alexis sat with me for awhile. Grandma turned cold. Hot to cold, the barrier of her life and breath no longer keeping them apart.

Grandma never liked when my brother and I added too much artificial sweetener to our cups of tea. At that Cracker Barrel over the years, I always placed myself in the chair next to her, as I did when I took care of her in the hospital bed leading up to her death, as I did when I held her hand after she was gone, as I did when I saw her in the casket wearing the shirt I helped pick out for her. She used to move the sugar away from us and wave her finger, her all-seeing eye placed on me whenever I sat close enough. My brother and I treated it like a game. Who could sneak the Splenda past Grandma? Make it sweeter, sweeter than her if that was even possible. Make it sweet, so sweet it burns.

Then she was still and no sweetness could bring her back.

Grief is the moment you can never taste again.

I wish I remembered the conversations that took place at that table every year, that same table, the oil lamps lit by a waiter or waitress as the sun neared the horizon and the shadows stretched across the room. Stretched, stretched like a black hole. Stretched thin, like 16mm through a projector, rolling across the floor and shirt sleeves and dirty socks. Pappy often filmed the Cracker Barrel dinners with his camera. I could ask him to dig that up again, although the images and sounds might still be too fresh for him.

Pappy sometimes showed me films of her from 1999 or 2007 or 2012 with his bedroom VCR. The tape would whirl, hum, and shift—the play. “And we’re live with the lost . . .”

Instead of remaining at the table to wait for the food, my brother and I often scampered over to a nearby checkers set. Red and black and grey. Grandma sometimes came over to watch, or my parents, any of them giving us advice to complicate the game. Ryan usually won or I got bored. Sometimes we colored at the table. Grandma colored with us. Broken pencils and crayons

neglected in a basket like unrealized aspirations, menus with tic-tac-toe games, napkins with blue crayon dolphins on them.

At her home in Chesterton, she taught me how to draw palm trees with crayons. Bracelets on her wrists, wrings, red lipstick and glasses. Softness. Freckles and moles. I have the freckles. She started with the curved trunk then moved to the pointy branches and leaves, the coconuts. The small island in the middle of a large ocean. Birds made of an elongation of the letter "v".

After she died, I wanted to be on an island far away, by myself, deep in the humid jungle, under a canopy of palms and orchids and cacao and rubber trees and bromeliads that would protect me from pain—a place where I could sweat out my fear.

In grief, I felt vulnerable, open, susceptible to planes overhead and sharp branches. I drank so much after Grandma died. Clear or green bottles of Jameson and Maker's Mark in a dusk dance or two, waking up on gravel alleys once or twice at 3:30 in the morning, dew on my back, fraternity parties when I ignored my brothers telling me to slow down, turn in, take a break, just focusing on the insanity of rap songs and bass earthquakes screaming at me from the speakers, my hair frolicking, sweating, hands bending, dancing, dancing, dancing until toenails bent, clinging to balconies, dismissing them all, that music, the loud music telling me to be as reckless as possible, swimming through a pool of people, an introvert's hell and release, a random girl, blacked out, approaching me after I said no to many things, reaching down my pants and squeezing me hard. I did not ask for this. I did not sign up for it.

Grandma had only been dead a couple months. I needed her to tell me to stop hurting myself.

Why do I feel at all, I wondered. *I should not be feeling*. I wanted the alcohol and the girl to wash the sadness away. She never saw me. She only felt me, and only for her, and I wanted to deserve it.

If someone could reach the most private part of my body, past my belt and through my jeans and briefs, down to there, the place I saved for only the most intimate encounters, how could I keep my sadness private? After that, my body felt foreign, like anyone could touch it when they pleased, like a statue in a park. It confused me, and in that state, I decided to give my body to those who wanted it for awhile because I thought, since the girl liked my body, that it was the only way to get any attention. I wore the outfit I wore that night again at other parties, hoping to feel attractive. A few people used it as they pleased, without concern for me, just for my body, and I let them.

Are we trapped in our bodies or are they our only connection to the world?

Are they the highways of our lives?

Grandma's body, how it fell apart at the end like a Jenga tower. In her final months, she lost so much weight that her wedding rings consistently slipped off her fingers without a sound. One of us attending to her placed them on again, only to find them a few hours later sinking in her hospital bed in the living room or caught in the thick carpeting.

Every time I placed the ring back on, I hoped it would remind her to survive a little longer for me. A selfish thought, but I wanted her to stay.

Wear the rings, Grandma. The rings are life.

I believed in what she needed daily, distracting myself from her body literally rotting before me. I stayed home from college that summer of 2015 because I recognized it as her last summer, the one so hot, burning, flooding the living room with scalding red light. A chicken coop, a darkroom. I recognized her birthday in March as her last too. She was so sick by then.

How do you celebrate a birthday you know to be the last? By talking about anything but, I supposed. I stayed home the summer after her birthday to focus, to support Pappy, I stayed home to mow their lawn, to watch TV with her, feed her, give her liquid forms of food because she could not swallow, sit at diner counters with Pappy and talk about her, what we would do to keep her alive as long as we could, the consideration of miserable feeding tubes that bought a month or two (a road we never took). The concentration on temporarily keeping her alive kept me from thinking about her death.

The leaves so green in July, the swimming pools so blue. If you dive deep enough, if you climb far enough inward, the sounds cease.

So many nightmares with only sound, blackness and screaming, the screaming when she died, night after night after night after night. I hated sleeping because I knew what was in store. I'd seen the teasing teaser trailer.

"Day by day," my mom always said. "Take it day by day."

Finally, the waitress again. Hope in our dawning faces. The Nashville day dancing a number on our cheeks. The food arrived at our Cracker Barrel table and we gobbled it up, scratching our temples and rubbing our eyes. Elena needed to go home. She was sick, needed to do laundry, cram in some projects. My job to take her there safely, to drive. Safety in cars. The

highway. That Gary Numan song, vibrations of the synthesizer, synthesis of the essay finally coming to me.

The waitress, detached, faceless, like the nurse who cared for Grandma. The nurse like Nurse Ratched, so stoic, so harsh.

I remember a few days before her death, a nurse arrived to check up on her at home. Pappy and my Mom and I helped Grandma around all day during those last weeks, especially in cleaning her now frequent, uncontrollable bowel movements. She moaned with pain every time we rolled her one way or another on her hospital bed in the brightened living room, too heavy for us to lift by ourselves. So much sun that last week or so, piercing through the blinds, sizzling us like chicken eggs.

Nurses visited often instead of relatives who lived far away. They came later, after her death, not knowing of her condition until it was too late.

July heat and air conditioning leaving icicles on the furniture. Birds sweating, screaming outside, pecking at the seed spilled around the porch. The air turned to its coldest because Grandma always liked it that cold. The nurse, in blue or white, hours in her hair, entered the scene in the early afternoon. At first, I assumed the nurse to be like the others, to be considerate and sympathetic. After her arrival, she wanted to unclothe my Grandma to bathe her. So was her job for so many of the elderly and the dying.

Much later, I accepted the difficulty of her position as a reason for her shortness and irritation. She began to take off Grandma's faded, stained dress as I preoccupied myself in the kitchen a room over. When I reentered the room, with some private parts of my Grandma clearly visible, the nurse howled at me to leave. I reassured her that I cleaned her previously, that the body needed tending, bed sores eating away at her, so much pain that I could not look away, but the nurse remained adamant.

Red blush. Blood rush. My face, a bright red, steam, heat.

My temper rose up, I wanted to rage at that nurse, explain to her in shouting how she understood nothing about our suffering. My mother and Pappy cleaned Grandma with washcloths in the background, the usual routine, dabbing her with comfortable, smooth towels, water to cool her down, to polish her, to fight the pain, not minding much the nurse and I going at it. It lasted twenty seconds or so. After dishing out my anger, I left the living room to appease the nurse.

Nurse Ratched. Nurse Wretched.

I hated how an outsider thought I needed permission to care for my Grandma, that nudity or exposure mattered at the time and that she should decide what I am to do. It's *my* Grandma. *You don't know her like I do, I thought, and you never will.*

I watched her die, felt the life leave her, felt her hands turn cold in mine and the blood stop running through her. I saw Death take Grandma. Our screams did nothing.

I was so crazy about everything then and in the year following.

Do you remember those trips Grandma? Do you remember that July heat, the same heat in which you died, beating down on us, the sweat at your collar and in our armpits, our feet tapping the ground and the creaking rhythms as you rocked with me in the chairs in the big log cabin?

Blankets on Grandma. Keep her warm in the air conditioning. Not too tight, around her arms, up to her chin.

I remember as she thinned out from disease, I thinned out in sadness. I stopped eating. I sweated more. I worked out harder, ran faster and farther. I found that I couldn't burn off pain. After she died, food no longer had taste. Days without eating, without savoring any flavor, ribs visible, my face sinking into a purple abyss, my eyes bloodshot. I loved hurting my body because that's what death did to you, Grandma. I survived and you died.

Grandma, are you the hawks that fly above me? Are you watching ahead of me, protecting me?

Mom and Aunt Cindy decorate your grave for every holiday. They spend hours on it for you. I came to see you there almost every day for a year and then I tried to wean off the addiction, the thought that somehow I could get you back in the cemetery.

I go back to you when I am able. Is that where I should talk to you?

Some people just need the wind but I need stone.

A graveyard was broken pianos, leaning pieces jutting out of the earth, dust over the music, ivory and iron and wood fibers made of stone. A mysterious kind of musical magic born there. These stories, the music played and the fingerprints left on the keys and chords, on the stones, etched in, quarter notes and whole rests and crescendos. Instruments that made no sound.

Names and dates and stories, chords and bells and chimes on a hill, drowned out by the noise of life moving on all around me, by chickens on farmhouses pointing North, by the city ambience.

If death was a sound, I think it would be the ending E chord of the Beatles' "A Day in the Life."

I saw more of the country after Grandma died. Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, Maryland, Washington D.C., Florida. Cracker Barrels everywhere, that old familiar tune and smell. She was never there and yet she was everywhere in them, at the corner table, in the gift shop, in the restroom, near the cashiers, rocking on the porch, in the parking lot. Bob Evans, McDonald's too, everywhere she sat and ate but never came back to me.

Each year at the Columbus Cracker Barrel, my brother and I waited for the stoplight above the restroom entrance. When it turned green, we proceeded. Green's how you know to move forward.

April's green. Striking green, stabbing green, bleeding green buds, the itchy season.

How long do we wait for the light now that you are gone?

We stopped at those Cracker Barrels out of habit. This morning, as the gilded rays illuminated my fingers and forehead, I wanted to be with you. In Nashville, Tennessee, all those years later, an invisible third chair at the table.

Join us, Grandma. Please, for me. One more time.

When I finally shared my struggles of grief with him, my dad played me "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." The song made him think of me, my love for Grandma, the special room in my heart where she lived. He thought the song might give me peace, that it might help to feel through it, a journey with Dylan, the poetry and that slow rock comforting my asphyxiated heart.

It did. Dad was right.

And later, during a Spring Break trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in the middle of my junior year of college, the song came to me again. My friends and I meant to enter a basement bar on the downtown stretch, but as soon as I opened the door, I heard Dylan's song, and I told them I needed to wait outside. I held the door for them.

I tried to bury that song in my grief and it found me again, hundreds of miles away, at a valley bar on vacation. No Cracker Barrels nearby. I waited on the ramp way that led down to the

bar, afraid to open that door, to hear that music again, just staring through the glass at my friends ordering food and drinks at the bar counter.

Waiting, waiting for a song to end, waiting for a change. Springtime in Tennessee, a year before, 2016. March, leaves just sprouting, knocking on April's door.

I thought my friends would venture out to help me, to say something wise, to lift me back up. They did not understand what the song signified, what it did to me. I waited by the glass door alone for some time, which proved to be worse than listening to the song, until I figured I needed to face it, so I braved it and let all the music take me back. The background noise and light became a blur as I continued into the basement bar.

I reached them but I had already lost my appetite.

How could I tell Elena all of this as we sat there eating, scarfing down food for our sore tummies and throbbing heads? She knew about my grieving days, the ones filled with alcohol and starvation. She could still see them in my eyes, in the way my fork scooped up hash browns, in the way I said, "It just hit me. All at once."

And yet, I found another Cracker Barrel, another restaurant, more rocking chairs, one near the hotel. *Meals after your passing*. What happens in between the restaurants of our lives? Is that distance?

Or is it the call of the road, a beckoning, *a way to see you again, Grandma*? Is it the way to know how to miss the ones we love?

Or is it a ride to where the grass is greening?